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C O N F I D E N T I A L LAGOS 000631

SIPDIS

CAIRO FOR MAXSTADT, TASKENT FOR BURKHALTER, PARIS FOR  
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TAGS: EPET CASC PINS ASEC PREF PGOV PHUM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: TOTALFINAELF SUSPENDS OPERATIONS AT FOUR  
FIELDS IN NIGER DELTA

- REF: A. (A) ABUJA 558  
B. (B) LAGOS 624  
C. (C) ABUJA 554  
D. (D) ABUJA 555

Classified By: Robyn Hinson-Jones, reasons 1.5 (c) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. TotalFinaElf (TFE) has become the latest victim of the strife between the Ijaws and Itsekiris in the Niger Delta. TFE has withdrawn its employees from four fields and ceased production there. The Ijaws, in an effort to ensure that their complaints are heard, now threaten to destroy the oil pipelines if the Government of Nigeria does not respond to their grievances. Meanwhile ChevronTexaco continued its drawdown of staff. Three hundred persons including staff, contractors, and displaced persons remain to be evacuated. End summary.

¶2. (C) On March 24, TotalFinaElf's Deputy Manager for Technical Affairs told CG that company officials became aware last week of possible future agitation in four of the fields the company is operating. The fields are located two hours by boat and 10 minutes by helicopter east of Warri. Consequently, on March 21, TFE stopped pumping oil from these fields, evacuated 54 of its 144 staff there. The company intended to leave behind a skeletal crew of 20 people. TFE's four fields normally produce 7,500 bpd out of a total of 140,000 bpd plus 6 million cubic meters of natural gas.

¶3. (C) On March 22, TFE staff on site were told of a heavily armed group of 70-80 Ijaws on its way to the facilities. The Ijaws arrived in three speed boats and a gunboat. They wore uniforms and carried sophisticated radio equipment. The Ijaws began firing at TFE's security force and killed three soldiers, a Nigerian logistician, and a mechanic. The last victim was a Nigerian security consultant, a retired Army colonel who was tracked down and murdered in his office. The Ijaws burned a nearby village and a TFE work camp. They left an hour later, which permitted TFE to evacuate 137 people including all remaining TFE staff, contractors, and Nigerian military personnel. As of 1500 March 24, no TFE remained on site. Even in retrospect, TFE'S Deputy Manager did not say why the facility was attacked or what the Ijaws wanted.

4.(C) Despite the loss of six lives, TFE's Deputy Manager reported that little physical damage was done at the fields. TFE staff were able to shut down the facility thus lessening concerns of environmental damage. Nevertheless, TFE management remains concerned that some disaffected groups may seize the opportunity afforded by the lack of protection at the sites to vandalize or otherwise damage field equipment.

¶5. (C) Press sources report that the Ijaws are now threatening to destroy oil pipelines if their complaints reported in reftels are not addressed. Sola Omole, ChevronTexaco's General Manager of the Government and Public Affairs, told EconOff March 24 that although Chevron's facilities are largely unguarded, he thinks it unlikely that the Ijaws will carry out their threat. Nonetheless, ChevronTexaco continued its draw-down of staff in the Escravos area. Three hundred persons including staff, contractors, and displaced persons remain to be evacuated. We expect they will be withdrawn within the next day or two.  
HINSON-JONES